"Have you ever been on the bridge? It has a heartbeat": oral histories of San Francisco's Bay Bridge and Golden Gate Bridge, 1933-1989

Samuel J. Redman
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Abstract: This article explores the San Francisco – Oakland Bay Bridge and Golden Gate Bridge as elements of the cultural memory of Northern California. Focusing on newly-recorded oral history interviews at the University of California, Berkeley, this article argues that the Bay Bridge and Golden Gate Bridge evolved as cultural symbols in the decades following their opening. Both bridges emerged as symbols for the region, but each with distinctive and different meanings, including humanity’s triumph over nature, memorialisation of returning troops from war, disaster and site of tragedy.

Keywords: San Francisco, USA; Bay Bridge; Golden Gate Bridge; cultural memory; suicide; bridge construction; Oakland, California

‘I wonder if you think of a bridge as a living thing or if you think of it as a static structure’, I asked. My interviewing partner Martin Meeker and I were well into our oral history interview on a typically decent day in California. We sat in a cramped California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) warehouse. Warming slowly with the afternoon sunlight, we enjoyed our recorded conversation. Our interview series on the San Francisco – Oakland Bay Bridge, in collaboration with Caltrans, the Bay Area Toll Authority (BATA) and the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) began hitting its stride.

Richard Mooradian, a well-built man with strong hands and engaging smile, was our narrator for the day. Mooradian is an expert tow-truck driver, skilled welder and jack-of-all-trades labourer who enthusiastically responded to the same question about the bridge I asked everybody during our oral history project. Some narrators took the bait and ran with invitations to symbolically consider the bridge. Others proved less interested in metaphor.

Mooradian hardly needed a breath before confidently responding with a wide smile, ‘Oh, it’s living. Have you ever been on the bridge? It has a heartbeat’. He continued describing the different bridges he’s worked on, ‘They all have a heartbeat’. Mooradian was happily gaining momentum now, ‘They’re all different. They all bounce and move in a different way, and that’s the heartbeat. The bridge is alive.’ Expressively peering into the camera, he added, ‘Yes, I’m a sap for saying it. I really don’t care. No, the bridge is alive. It is’.

As Meeker and I left the warehouse, we looked back at the massive bridge. Could Mooradian be right, I wondered. Is the bridge really alive?

Traffic hummed across the bridge in the distance – rumbles serving as a constant reminder about the structure’s purpose in moving people and goods. Built early in the Great Depression to connect Oakland and San Francisco, the bridge underwent several major updates before the most recent transformation, a technologically advanced self-anchored suspension bridge replacing the
In 2013, a new self-anchored suspension bridge span opened (left), replacing the older cantilever bridge section opened in 1936 (right). The cities of Oakland and Berkeley are in the background. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

When interviewing over a dozen people, spoke to transfiguring meanings connected to many other bridges in California, the United States and around the world.

This article’s primary contribution is based on the analysis of fifteen newly recorded oral histories. Most of the oral history narrators quoted in this article were participating in an oral history project on San Francisco bridges, while other extracts are taken from existing regional, environmental, labour and architectural history materials in the Bancroft Library. Indeed, the dramatic rise of large-scale bridges in the area during the 1930s came to hold an important place in the memories of many individuals. Several participants in UC Berkeley’s ‘Rosie the Riveter, World War Two Home Front’ oral history project were either asked about the bridges or introduced the topic organically during interviews.* The opening of the Bay Bridge and the Golden Gate Bridge were considered deeply important to the region and this proves true when interviewing long-time California residents. The opening ceremonies created especially strong memories, recalled as enjoyable reminders of America’s ability to confront complex problems through scientific progress and engineering expertise, in addition to the rugged strength and perseverance of modern workers.

Certain forms echo throughout oral histories of the Bay Bridge. The structure tends to be remembered as a bridge changing everyday life in the region. Despite it being the largest bridge span in the world and an incredible engineering marvel, it quickly became a known mainly as a tool – a commuter bridge. The
While the Bay Bridge and Golden Gate Bridge emerged before the New Deal’s outset, they underscored the value, potential and need for major infrastructure projects early in the Great Depression. Along with the Boulder Dam, later renamed the Hoover Dam, the projects helped inspire more imaginative thinking in building infrastructure.

In 1965, historian Alan Trachtenberg published an important study of the Brooklyn Bridge, reading the structure as not only an important artefact, but as a cultural symbol. Trachtenberg explains, ‘I mean to designate two separate modes of existence: one has a specific location in time and space; the other, its place in the mind, or in the collective imagination of Americans’. He ultimately argues the Brooklyn Bridge’s story became an important cultural marker for rapid transformations taking place throughout the United States. The Brooklyn Bridge, for Trachtenberg, can be partly understood as representing the transition between rural and agrarian society to urban and industrial society. This article builds on Trachtenberg’s notion that bridges might be read as symbols. A symbol serves a culture by articulating in objective form the important ideas and feelings of that culture’, he writes. Once these cultural symbols became codified in popular culture, he continues, they ‘frequently become fixed and hard, arousing automatic responses’. Indeed, oral histories offer new texts both reinforcing accepted motifs about bridges while also suggesting these structures, just as frequently, carried highly individualised meanings not necessarily reflected in broader culture.

Considered in this manner, the Golden Gate Bridge and Bay Bridge are unmistakably interwoven in the region’s cultural fabric and historical memory. Nevertheless, a closer look reveals that both bridges came to possess their own unique symbolic meanings which, although stable at certain points, also evolved over time. While the Golden Gate Bridge was celebrated for its elegance in terms of design, the Bay Bridge came to symbolically represent achievement in large public works projects, functional utility in engineering, the emergent automobile age and, similarly to the Hoover Dam, muscular mastery over nature. As with Trachtenberg’s study, I am interested in how these symbols evolved and were shaped over time.

The Loma Prieta earthquake in 1989 pushed to the fore new cultural symbols attached to the Bay Bridge, reshaping the meaning of the structure for not only the region, but the entire United States after the partial bridge collapse. Seismic concerns further prolonged the process of rebuilding the eastern span of the bridge, and introduced a new series of ideas and modes of thinking about the structure. The lengthy debates following the earthquake continued through the completion of a self-anchored suspension (SAS) span on the eastern side. This said, the bridge’s meaning was evolving far earlier, in the mid-twentieth century, especially for those who worked on or routinely drove across the structure. In the half-century following the original completion of both structures (the Bay Bridge was built between
1933-1936 and the Golden Gate Bridge from 1933-1937), the bridges reshaped transportation in the region while also gradually assuming a deepening role as icons representing the San Francisco Bay Area, California and the West Coast.

The story of the Bay Bridge also represents a critical, if incomplete, transition to the automobile age. Despite the bridge’s obvious utility for car owners, dispensing with the need to travel across the bay by ferry, public transit still fitted within the initial plans for the structure. Until 1958, the lower deck of the bridge was used for rail transit with the privately owned and operated Key System train. Eventually, officials chose to pave the lower deck of the bridge, allowing automobile traffic to flow both ways, a harbinger suggesting the automobile’s post-war predominance.

Within just a few years of opening, motorists complained about growing traffic congestion on the bridge. Less than a decade after opening, planners seriously considered building a parallel bridge intended to relieve Bay Bridge traffic. The Key System train finally ceased operating in 1958.

While the Golden Gate Bridge became associated with suicides, especially following the 2006 documentary *The Bridge*, the Bay Bridge also witnessed tragic accidents and suicides. Mainly, however, the Bay Bridge became a utilitarian symbol for the region as a commuter bridge: a means to an end, the main artery pumping blood between two vital organs. This article tells the story of these evolving meanings, as remembered by those encountering these changes.

**Construction**

Even as the bridge towers rose above the San Francisco Bay, some expressed anxiety over the structures’ possible implications. Phil Townsend Hanna authored an editorial published in the automobile magazine *Westways* in September 1935 which noted San Francisco’s relative geographic isolation, explaining how the bridge might have several effects, including a re-distribution or growth in population density. The location of the city, squeezed on a narrow peninsula, created numerous transit problems as the population soared. The author points to anxiety amongst city shop owners and other business leaders, who feared easier access to San Francisco might lead to a hollowing-out of its residential population. He also suggested that, should the estimates for daily traffic prove correct, the city’s infrastructure would simply be unable to absorb such an influx.

‘The construction of the bridges, at the outset, was unequivocally applauded by every citizen from the lowliest to the mightiest, for they were viewed as instruments of deliverance. They are generally speaking, still so hailed, but the hysteria has subsided somewhat and not a few individuals have come to be assailed with certain misgivings about their utility.’

He predicted that the bay bridges, if well integrated, would lift the transportation system of the entire bay region to new and advanced levels, but warned that unless integrated they might become ‘mere monuments
to the science of engineering and to the decadence of a glorious city’. 28 The motif celebrating the city fits well with the congratulatory mood accompanying the bridges’ opening events.

‘My dad was a very hard worker’, Evelyn Rodes remembered about her father, describing how he found work as a carpenter helping to build the Bay Bridge in the 1930s. 29 Finding work was tough during the Great Depression and her family struggled, but as a skilled carpenter Rodes’s father found fairly steady work. ‘He liked heavy construction, like the bridges and big buildings’. 30 Rodes was a young girl when the bridge was constructed, and when remembering details about her father’s work on the bridge, she refers to her collection of faded photographs. ‘There’s one [photograph] there that shows the men down inside of it [submersible caissons], where they built those piers’. She added, ‘It was dangerous in those days, too, because you didn’t have the equipment’. Her father told her from time to time about the people he worked with who were hurt or killed on the job. Oral history provides unique insights into familial relationships and lingering memory about past events. Rodes also clearly maintained a strong emotional connection to the bridge, inspired by pride in her father’s work.

The Bay Bridge’s monumental construction inspired those beyond the region. Growing up poor in Great Depression-era Los Angeles, Chuck Seim found deep inspiration in the bridge. He recalled:

I was fortunate that we did get newspapers and we got some magazines. I guess I was fortunate there were articles in both of those about the Bay Bridge, and I just devoured those. First thing I’d do, I’d look for them. I would read about this and I’d say, my, that must be the most interesting job in the world. You see, that’s that exposure, maybe once a month – if I was lucky, I’d be able to read whatever it is – but that exposure, plus the structural engineer down the street. So I decided I want to go to school. I knew I wanted to be an engineer. 32

A few years later, Seim enrolled at UC Berkeley to study engineering. He continued into a lengthy career as a bridge engineer, working on bridges in California, later consulting on numerous bridge projects around the country and world. Seim made clear, however, that by the mid-twentieth century, multiple areas of engineering expertise were necessary to maintain bridges. He elaborated, ‘Bridge engineers don’t estimate traffic. We estimate gravity, and wind, and current […] We’re completely dependent upon another portion of civil engineering, called traffic engineering’. 33

Seim claimed, as a bridge engineer, he was inclined to gaze at bridges from a different viewpoint, explaining:

If you look at a bridge and you say, ‘That’s a beautiful bridge,’ it doesn’t make any difference. What’s important is it’s serving society and people can admire it. Now, for me, as an engineer, when I look at a bridge, I look at how it conducts forces down to the ground. That’s the first thing I look — oh, wow, that’s a beautiful bridge, too. Yes, but it’s got a logical stress flow. 34

In his long career working on many different bridges, Seim clearly considered the San Francisco – Oakland Bay Bridge a highlight. He cannot help but look at bridges as solutions, some of them quite beautiful, to complicated problems. He describes his feelings about working on the bridge:

Oh, it was a marvellous bridge to work on. It was just beauty. Just pure artistic — not in the beautiful artistic sense, but in the way they put everything together. How they solved all their problems. It was just marvellous.

Though they might not have conceptualised it as such at the time, the planning, design and construction of the Bay Bridge, the media coverage of these events and the opportunity to experience the bridge first hand
by driving over it or otherwise seeing it for the first time left a lasting mark on people like Chuck Seim and Evelyn Rodes. Notably, much of this imagery was born out of the early celebration orchestrated to commemorate the opening of the Bay Bridge and subsequently the Golden Gate Bridge.

**Celebration 1936-1939**

In 1939, a World’s Fair opened near the San Francisco Bay. The event helped solidify the bridges in popular memory. Historian Kevin Starr notes:

Opening in 1939, the Golden Gate International Exposition on Treasure Island celebrated the completion of the San Francisco – Oakland Bay and Golden Gate bridges, together with the creation of the exposition site, Treasure Island, through a massive dredging and filling of shoals adjacent to Yerba Buena Island. Running from February to October 1939, then reorganised for a second run from May to September 1940 […]

Starr describes how the art, performances and other events surrounding the fair worked to underscore the futurism embodied in the two bridges. The bridges began to tell a story. Bay Area resident John ‘Jack’ Lamborn recognised the same story as a boy when remembering in his oral history, ‘both bridges […] because see […] both told a story of the future’. Starr elaborates that this futurist-inspired story was also about progress, technology and peace, especially along the Pacific Rim, but the Second World War radically altered these narratives.

Once the two bridges were open, major festivities began. Louise Fraser, a student at UC Berkeley, remembered being hired as one of four girls on a parade float. She said in her oral history, recorded when she was ninety-nine years old, ‘Of course there was a big celebration in San Francisco and Oakland – because they waited until both of them were finished for that celebration. And I remember we went over there. And, of course, they had a parade and I was on the float’. She continued, interrupted by her own periodic giggle, ‘they had all kinds of stuff going on. And of course everybody coming over, they had dinners and special dinners at all of the restaurants and all that stuff around the North Beach’. Fraser and other women students were hired to dress in costume representing themes such as agriculture, industry and culture. She continues to hold fond memories about both major bridges and the accompanying celebration.

Another engineer who later spent considerable time working on the Bay Bridge was also deeply affected by the construction. He first laid eyes on the bridge during the World’s Fair at the newly constructed Treasure Island, situated between San Francisco and Oakland in the new bridge’s shadow. Robert McDougald remembered:

As a boy, I read some about the construction, but what really impressed me was I did go across the Bay Bridge in, I think, 1939, and went to the fair, the Golden Gate Exposition. I was very impressed, because we drove all the way across, and then back, and then went to the fair. I was really impressed with the Bay Bridge. The Golden Gate was a wonderful
bridge also, but I was really excited about going across the Bay Bridge.  

Evelyn Rodes’s father worked on both the Bay Bridge and the construction of the artificial island in 1939; impressed, she recounted: “It’s a completely man-made island, and it turned out that the World’s Fair – that was the most beautiful World’s Fair I’ve ever seen. I’ve seen a lot of them. That was unbelievable.” For Rodes, the strong emotional connection to the bridge is clearly laced with personal pride and sense of identity attached to her father’s work on the bridge. 

The fair not only left a mark on the San Francisco area. Historian Lisa Rubens explains that the exhibition ‘constituted metaphoric new grounds in American culture, auguring the post-war proliferation of trade marts, shopping malls and theme parks, as well as a shift of American industry and population to the West’. Rubens elaborates that the idea for the fair was connected to impending completion of the two bridges, adding that after six years of planning and construction, the fair was also shaped by government contracts and commercial opportunities provided by the New Deal, and the American people’s changing taste for mass culture.

An article in Science News Letter after the opening of both bridges featured an image of the completed Bay Bridge, explaining to the readers that an artificial island will greet visitors to the upcoming world’s fair. For a moment in history, the Bay Bridge and Golden Gate Bridge were but two portions of an emerging popular image connected to the Bay Area. The celebratory mood following the bridge openings and World’s Fair would be tempered by December 1941 with the United States’ entry into the Second World War when the bridges entered a new chapter.

Welcome home

Bernard Weisberger served as a Japanese code-breaker in the US Army during the Second World War. At times it seemed the conflict would never end, but he vividly remembers passing under the Golden Gate Bridge as an important symbolic image. He remembered a wartime expression in his oral history, ‘We used to joke and say, The Golden Gate in ’48.’ To his relief, the war came to an end much sooner than anticipated and the newly completed bridges greeted troops returning home.

The Golden Gate Bridge grew in significance as a national landmark following the war, but in 1945 many Californians continued to think of the two bridges as simultaneous achievements. In a poem published by and written for the California Historical Society, Harry W Frantz describes the many sensations encountered in the city. Frantz’s poem opens by acknowledging ‘the time-dark horizons of memory’, but explains to the reader that earlier times recall happier memories than the difficult times of war. ‘I shall think of five lights’, the poem begins. The list describes several key vistas around the city and important landmarks unique to San Francisco. The poem describes sunlight vanishing beyond the natural Golden Gate, followed by harbour lights, flashes of green and red from buoys, and distant lights from moving trains. Memory then moves the visitor into the San Francisco Bay, including the Bay Bridge and Alcatraz Prison among the built features of the landscape, but notably and poetically, the natural vista of the Golden Gate overshadows the new bridge.

The poem suggests that the Bay Bridge, an engineering wonder and visible mark on the landscape, remained for a time equal to the Golden Gate Bridge.

The San Francisco region continued to serve as an important port of departure for American troops during the Vietnam War. During later conflicts, however, airplanes played a far greater role in transporting soldiers overseas and over time, as many military installations left the Bay Area, the association between the bridges and returning troops began fading.

Suicide and death

Suicides eventually became intimately tied to both structures, but especially the Golden Gate Bridge. Starr notes that the first person to commit suicide on the bridge was a forty-nine year old bargeman named HB Wobber, a First World War veteran. In August 1937, only a few months after the bridge’s opening, Wobber told another man walking on the bridge, ‘This is where I get off. I am going to jump’. Despite the best efforts of nearby pedestrians to grab hold of him, he plunged over the barrier to his death.

In the years following Wobber’s jump, others followed and suicides became fodder for media coverage. A popular documentary on the Golden Gate Bridge suicide phenomenon appeared in 2006. As of 2012, there have been an estimated 1,600 incidents in total where human bodies were recovered below the bridge. One major and largely unrecognised factor playing a role in the evolving connection between suicide and the Golden Gate Bridge was the manner in which the events were responded to by public relations officials. Greg Bayol, who served in Caltrans’ public affairs unit working on public relations for over twenty years, recalled the response to suicides on the Bay Bridge:

We ignored it. It was a policy. One of the first things I learned when I went to work in public affairs, and I had a conversation with my boss, and he said, ‘As far as the suicides on the Bay Bridge we just don’t talk about them. We do not want to start’. Like the Golden Gate Bridge has found themselves in a trap because there’s no pedestrian walkway, though people have – they’ve stopped their cars and they’ve jumped. The number? I don’t know the number. And, in fact, we have been asked by the press to tell them what the number and we say it’s just something that can’t be put together. We’d have to do a lot of research of the archives. We just don’t want to get into doing that.
Despite less attention paid to the problem, suicides and other hazardous events also happened on the Bay Bridge. In his oral history, long-time Caltrans employee Bob Sorensen recalled:

After I became supervisor and came back to the Bay Bridge, there was a woman who climbed up in the East Bay, in the cantilever section. I guess she had taken some pills. She was passed out up at the top. She was going to jump. I was driving by and they kind of flagged me down […] So I put on my safety belt. There were two guys that were on their way up there already to get her. So I grabbed a safety belt, and we went up to the top of one of the cantilever sections and put a belt on this woman, who was passed out. At this point, she was just sort of – her words were very slurred and she was obviously about to pass out. We carried her down. We brought her down from the tower.³⁰

In another incident, Sorensen was working maintenance on the wooden timbers surrounding the bridge piers with another individual. He remembered:

We were on the pier itself. I think I had the chainsaw going. I was cutting one of the timbers to size, and I finished cutting, and one of the guys said to me, ‘Did you throw something in the water?’ I kind of looked at him, and the other guy kind of looked at me, and we looked out into the water, and all of the sudden this guy comes flying up out of the water. He had jumped from the lower deck [of the Bay Bridge]. He had missed this pier cap probably about ten feet, maybe eight feet. He just missed landing on us. And he hit the water. He came up – it was like a cork shot out of a bottle. He just came up, probably to his waist, out of the water. Poseidon rising! We had a life ring there, in case one of us had fallen in. We had life preservers on, because you’re working around the water. We had heard cars, brakes and things, squealing, tires squealing on the upper deck. He had jumped. He had jumped over the side, off the lower deck. We immediately got on the radio. He blows out some water. I looked at him in the eyes, and there was no focus there, but he was blinking and he was alert.³¹

While suicides and suicide attempts were prevalent on both major Bay Area bridges, the phenomenon became more closely associated with the Golden Gate Bridge than the Bay Bridge. In a medical study conducted in 1975, all six survivors of attempted suicide from the Golden Gate Bridge possessed suicide plans involving only the Golden Gate Bridge. The study concluded, ‘One survivor associated the beauty of the bridge with death and jumped from it because “I was attracted to the bridge – an affinity between me, the Golden Gate Bridge and death – there is a kind of form to it, a certain grace and beauty”. The Golden Gate Bridge is readily available and it is connected with suicide’.³² All six survivors purportedly supported installing a suicide prevention barrier and the study concluded the Golden Gate Bridge suggested unique and symbolic association with death, grace and beauty. Media reports romanticising the bridge as a popular location for suicides appeared only to reify the idea of suicide in the minds of those jumping from the bridge and surviving.³³

Suicides represent a regrettable social reality connected to both bridges. A closer look at the Golden Gate Bridge and Bay Bridge, two enormous structures completed with much fanfare and celebration, reveals that they gradually evolved to possess layered and more complex meanings over time. Suicides, traffic fatalities and other unfortunate incidents complicated the symbolic meanings connected to the bridges during the twentieth century and beyond.³⁴ While the media became enthralled with bridge-related suicides, it also worked to glamorise the bridge by embracing other dramatic stories.

**Working on the bridge**

Soon after the bridges were completed, programmes for routinely painting them were initiated separately under distinct supervisory bodies. Visible from the bridge platform and even the water below while combating the saltwater air, bridge painters worked from end to end on both major structures. An article in the *Saturday Evening Post* appearing in 1957 dramatised life for Golden Gate Bridge painters: ‘The failures come in fractions of a second. One instant, everything is safe. The next, death is inches away’.³⁵ With the bridge painters on the Golden Gate Bridge receiving more media attention and with rumours of better pay for virtually the same work, painters on the Bay Bridge considered themselves friendly rivals.

Born in 1935, Jack Giolitti was shaped by the skyscraper era. Big buildings fascinated him. Money was tight growing up. He and his two sisters worked in the fields in California until they were old enough to move away from home. Giolitti then worked as an apprentice for a watchmaker before joining the army. His girlfriend was studying to be a nurse in Oakland, so he moved to be closer to her. Looking for a job, he became a housepainter. He remembered, ‘And always driving across the Bay Bridge. I said, “This would be a nice place to work,” so I put an application there and I took the test and got accepted. That was in 1959’.³⁶

The bridge was huge, he remembers thinking. He joined the union. Slipping on old, dirty clothes in the morning, Giolitti would arrive to work by eight o’clock in the morning. Hard hats were optional, and if you wanted to wear one, you needed to bring your own. Paints were mixed depending on the task at hand and painters would bring their equipment and supplies with them to the bridge section they were working on for the day. Giolitti and his crew primarily worked on the eastern span of the Bay Bridge, the cantilever section. Occasionally, however, painters were pulled to another bridge, but rarely the other side of the Bay Bridge where another crew was permanently stationed. The eastern
section lacked handrails, making the job tougher and less safe. The work was dangerous and during his time working on the bridge several painters lost their lives. Gioletti also describes the prevalence of alcohol on the bridge, with some workers and supervisors both consuming heavy amounts on the job. He remembered, ‘There was a lot of alcohol drank on the bridge. A heck of a lot of it’. Oral history interviews recorded many years after the fact, unlike many other official sources, reveal realities obscured in written documentation.

The biggest change Gioletti described was the bay’s environmental conditions. He remarked on evolving regulations governing his work as a painter, a hassle in making his tasks take significantly longer, that also played a part in improved water quality. He noted:

> When I got to work in ‘59, the [San Francisco] Bay was a sewer basically. Everything you seen floating down there, including all the sewage from Oakland. In that area there, we used to dump out there in the Bay about halfway out and it was just a constant mess. And later on it got to be a clear. Now it’s clear and it’s a nice clean bay.

New bridges in California are today assigned painting contractors, making permanent positions like Gioletti’s increasingly rare. The mystique of the dramatic views and engineering marvels in San Francisco drew others in too, even years after the opening celebrations. William Baker, following study at the University of California and summers working as a contractor, became a civil engineer working for the Division of Bay Tolls Crossings. When asked by interviewer Martin Meeker what attracted him to the bridge especially, he pondered:

> I don’t know. Always fascinates me. I’m still fascinated by bridges. When my wife and I travel we often go look at bridges, take pictures. I’ve just always been interested in it. I grew up in the Berkeley hills looking at the Golden Gate Bridge and the Bay Bridge, so that may have had some influence on my desires.

Others who worked on the bridge also maintained strong feelings about the experience. Born in North Dakota in 1921, Frances Ryan moved with her sister to California, eventually finding work as a toll taker. Having seen the first women hired to work on the bridge as toll takers, she demanded the bus driver immediately stop to let her off so she could enquire about their work. She remembered,

> [The] Bay Bridge meant a lot to me, because I liked work there very much. That’s all I can say. I look back now. I always think, I’m a part of the first Bay Bridge. I always had some nice, soft feelings about it.
Conclusion
He might get a hard time for being, in his words, ‘a sap for saying it,’ but Richard Mooradian would find support for his notion that the Bay Bridge is a living, breathing thing. Like Frances Ryan, his feelings about the bridge and its cold, hard steel were warm, soft and lasting. Ronald Goldbruber, who spent years working as a field inspector on the bridge added, ‘all bridges breathe [...] the bridge is alive, it’s moving’. He continued, ‘and it’s designed to do that because if it was a rigid structure it would be brittle and could break’.44 If the bridge is alive, it is because it has to be.

As the Bay Bridge and Golden Gate started to rise, almost as if by magic to some observers, they began telling a story. Originally, this story was largely about the future. In the context of the Great Depression, the futurism and triumphalist message was well received. The story was also about technology in the modern world. Engineering and design against the unforgiving natural backdrop. Gradually, however, the story became about other realities: the growing Bay Area population, increased automobile traffic and constant need for maintenance. The bridge also told subtler stories about environmental history and death.

Oral history, in conversation with archival and secondary sources, reveals these changing collective and individual memories connected to the bridges, and other important structures and places over time. By the post-war era, writing about the Bay Bridge grew more complicated. The bridge came to possess different, sometimes contradictory, meanings. Increasing automobile ownership quickly strained the bridges’ ability to keep traffic moving. A short photographic feature in The Saturday Evening Post appearing in a 1955 issue of the magazine features a night-time shot of the Bay Bridge, serving as the backdrop for a bustling city. The article hints that the Embarcadero, once among the city’s busiest transportation hubs, had grown quieter as the ferry system went into decline. It explained that, ‘Now most traffic rolls—or creeps—over the double-decked eight-and-one-fourth-mile-long San Francisco – Oakland Bay Bridge’.45 As the bridge groaned under the weight of increased traffic, the meaning of the structure began to evolve.

Observers were as likely to marvel at the bridge as an engineering feat as they were to describe it as traffic-plagued source of headaches following the unprecedented growth of the suburbs and the accompanying automobile traffic. Still, its size, practicality and fixture in Bay Area life, complemented by breath-taking views of the cities or water below, made the Bay Bridge a significant and lasting element in regional identity.

By the 1960s, suicides too became a widely recognised issue. Studies involving survivors jumping from either bridge suggest some people felt a ‘unique association between the Golden Gate Bridge and suicide’.46 Indeed, the motif of the Golden Gate Bridge as a site of suicide has only been reinforced in recent years. Clearly, the meanings connected to both the Golden Gate Bridge and the Bay Bridge are still evolving. The bridges continue to be reinterpreted to some extent, but the symbolic meanings originally attached to them as grand engineering marvels, work opportunities and visions of the future still echo today. Other symbols and layers of meaning continue to be added as people experience the bridges in new and complex ways. When asked to reflect on the meaning of the bridge, Richard Mooradian, the expert welder and tow-truck driver, reacted strongly and without hesitation:

It’s rivets, it’s steel. It’s dirty at times. It’s a means to an end, to get by. You’re working and you’ve got to cross this thing, but it’s still looking out for you. It’s taking care of you. I don’t know. I can’t describe it. I really have affections for these bridges. I really do. I know that’s going to sound sappy. I really don’t care.47

When invited to take on studying the significance of bridges in the Bay Area, especially the Bay Bridge, as part of a historical mitigation project, our aim was to document the many stories connected to these structures. Clearly significant to the political, social and transportation history of the Bay Area, they have also come to shape and be shaped by an evolving series of symbols and identities, shifting in collective and individual memories over time. Lived experiences connected to the bridge left deep impressions on the oral history participants. Documenting these stories allows future generations to explore and reinterpret the past by asking their own questions and reading material with new perspectives. In this way the bridges and their history will continue to live.

NOTES
1. The oral histories created as a result of this project are available as the ‘Bay Bridge Oral History Project’, Regional Oral History Office (now Oral History Center), Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2013. Page numbers cited in this article indicate page numbers on the available transcripts. 2. Interview with Richard Mooradian; recorded by Martin Meeker with Sam Redman, 2012, p 39. 3. ‘Bay Bridge Oral History Project’, 2013.


29. Interview with Evelyn Rodes; recorded by Sam Redman with Martin Meeker, 2012, p 2.


32. Interview with Charles Seim; recorded by Sam Redman, 2012, p 9.

33. Interview with Charles Seim, 2012, p 12.

34. Interview with Charles Seim, 2012, p 18.


38. Interview with Louise Fraser; recorded by Sam Redman, 2012, p 20.

39. Interview with Louise Fraser, 2012, p 22.

40. Interview with Robert McDougald; recorded by Sam Redman with Martin Meeker, 2012, p 4.

41. Interview with Evelyn Rodes, 2012, p 23.


49. Interview with Greg Bayol; recorded by Martin Meeker, 2013, p 79.

50. Interview with Bob Sorenson; recorded by Martin Meeker with Sam Redman, 2012, p 44.


54. In 1968, for example, a US Navy jet crashed into the Bay Bridge, killing both crew members. ‘Navy jet strikes Bay Bridge, pilots die, no others injured’, The Stanford Daily, vol 153, no 11, 1968, p 1. Bridge painter Jack Giolitti recalled the incident happened on a holiday. His crew would have otherwise been working on the bridge near the bridge section hit by the airplane. He remarked, ‘And I was one of the painters working in that exact spot because my safety belt – it would hang there and a paint bucket hanging there with two other guys. And everything was destroyed when the jet went through’. He added, ‘That was luck’. Interview with Jack Giolitti; recorded by Sam Redman with Martin Meeker, 2012, p 26.


59. Interview with Bill Baker; recorded by Sam Redman with Martin Meeker, 2012, p 2.

60. Interview with Frances Ryan; recorded by Sam Redman, 2012, p 20.

61. Interview with Ron Goldgruber; recorded by Sam Redman with Martin Meeker, 2012, p 31.


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